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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [ISLAMISTS](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)  
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: ISLAMISTS SHARE VIEWS ON ELECTORAL

REFORM, IRAQ, AND IRAN AT "AMERICAN DIWANIYA"

REF: KUWAIT 760

Classified By: DCM Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The DCM hosted on March 18 an "American diwaniya," inviting influential Islamists, both Shi'a and Sunni, to discuss their political views and objectives, the prospects for political reform in Kuwait, and the impact of sectarian violence in Iraq on Shi'a-Sunni relations in Kuwait. The event was well-attended with a relaxed atmosphere that was conducive to wide-ranging exchanges between Emboffs and Kuwaitis, and also between Sunni and Shi'a guests. Most attendees doubted Parliament would approve electoral reform legislation before the 2007 elections. Explaining the lack of parliamentary interest in a truly transparent electoral process, an Islamist professor at Kuwait University explained to emboffs how voters use cell phone cameras to verify they voted for a particular candidate to receive cash payouts. Several attendees noted that the upcoming Municipal Council elections, in which women will vote for the first time, would be a litmus test for women's political participation and was being watched closely by the Government and political groupings. The editor of Al-Furqan, a Salafi weekly, urged the U.S. to reach out more to Iraqi Sunnis, and cautioned that Shi'a could not be trusted and were intent on establishing a "kingdom" stretching from southern Lebanon to Iran. End summary.

#### Electoral Reform Unlikely Before 2007 Elections

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¶2. (C) Islamist contacts, both Shi'a and Sunni, attending post's "American diwaniya" on March 18 openly shared their views on electoral reform in Kuwait and regional security issues. Saleh Ashour, one of five Shi'a members of Parliament (MP), dismissed the possibility that a proposal to reduce the number of electoral constituencies from the current 25 would be passed before the 2007 parliamentary elections. He said the Government preferred to wait on the reform until it understood the still uncertain impact of female voters on election outcomes. Ashour noted that he had begun hosting a separate diwaniya for women in his constituency in preparation for their participation in the next parliamentary elections. Mohammed Al-Dallal, the Political Relations Chief for the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, was similarly pessimistic electoral reform would occur before the next elections. He believed, however, that a reduction proposal could be passed soon with the stipulation that it not go into affect until after the 2007 elections.

¶3. (C) Dr. Hamed Al-Matar, a professor at Kuwait University and a member of the ICM, argued that the window of opportunity for electoral reform was closing; he believed the

next Parliament would be even less likely to approve a reduction proposal. Al-Matar, who has written on electoral reform for the Arabic-daily Al-Qabas, claimed "100%" of parliamentary candidates used "wasta" (influence) or direct cash payments to win elections. Votes for cash were verified by either making voters swear on the Qur'an that they voted for the candidate or by the voter taking a picture of his/her voting sheet in the voting booth using a camera cell phone. Al-Matar believed a reduction would force political campaigning to evolve from "personal communication" to "mass communication."

#### Municipal Council Elections Litmus Test for Women's Vote

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14. (C) Further commenting on the effect of female voters, Mohammed Al-Kandari of the Higher Advisory Committee for the Application of Islamic Shari'a said concerns about language in the election law requiring women to exercise their political rights in accordance with Shari'a were unfounded. He explained that prior to the May 16, 2005 vote granting women's suffrage, his committee had written a book about the Holy Qur'an and women's political participation and concluded there were no prohibitions. He argued that anyone who wanted to limit the participation of women based on religious law was misinterpreting the Qur'an.

15. (C) Al-Kandari, like other guests, pointed to the upcoming special Municipal Council election, in which there are now two women among the 12 candidates for one seat, as a litmus test for women's political participation. Close attention is being paid to how the women campaign -- candidate Jenan Ramadan Bushihri does not want her picture on the campaign posters now littering major streets and instead opted for a logo depicting a family; whether women will turn

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out in big numbers to vote; and whether the Al-Awazem tribe, which has traditionally "held" a seat on the Municipal Council will instruct its women members to vote for an Al-Awazem candidate.

#### Salafi Concerns about Shi'a "Kingdom" in Iraq

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16. (C) On Iraq, Bassam Al-Shatti, the editor-in-chief of the Salafi magazine Al-Furqan and a professor at Kuwait University's College of Shari'a, expressed dismay that the U.S. was "ignoring" Sunnis in Iraq and pandering to the Shi'a. Al-Shatti maintained that the Shi'a had designs on establishing a "kingdom" that stretched from Lebanon to Iran, and that U.S. policies in Iraq, such as supporting the prime ministerial candidacy of Ibrahim Al-Jafari and turning a blind eye towards Iranian involvement in Iraqi affairs, were supporting such a plan. He cautioned PDoff that the Shi'a were "two-faced" and could not be trusted, and urged U.S. officials in Iraq to reach out to Iraqi Sunnis if they wanted to stabilize the situation there.

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17. (U) Many of the Islamists attending the event were U.S.-educated and, despite their criticisms of some U.S. policies, expressed genuinely positive views about the U.S. and American people. Their only critique, mentioned with some pride, was the effect of the U.S. on their children. Many noted that their children were thoroughly Americanized and spoke better English than Arabic. They expressed concern about the quality of Arabic-language instruction in private schools in Kuwait and said the public education provided to their children in the U.S. far exceeded public or private education offered in Kuwait.

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